

Continuing Operations During and After a Pandemic

Prepared by: South St. Louis County DWI Court
100 North 5th Avenue West, Duluth, MN 55802

Learning Objectives:

1. Identify strategies to continue operations during and after a pandemic.
2. Learn from fellow practitioners practices that are working for their courts during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Understand how to use resources that may be readily available in your community to assist with continuing operations.

Client Connection and Support

Overall Approach: Now is the time to focus on participant health, safety, and well-being. Consider pivoting from a compliance approach to one of adherence: engagement, connection, support. Compliance is only effective in holding people in a place where they can sustain some abstinence and find resources within themselves and in others to thrive in recovery and life. It's adherence that matters: the opposite of addiction is connection. This is an opportunity to see what clients are made of. Goal is to create a culture of support, connection. Compliance communicates "we don't trust you." Adherence communicates "we see what you're doing, we're proud of you, and we're all in this together."

Virtual Services: Consider offering virtual services for support, keeping in mind that not all participants will have access to technology such as the internet, mobile phones, smart phones, or apps. Work to provide technology & offer technology support whenever possible. Tons of online meetings, recovery support groups and talks, etc. available.

Focus on a Few Key Areas for Greatest Impact: Don't overwhelm clients. During the pandemic, there is lots of information—particularly virtual information—coming at all of us, all at once. Information overload can cause folks to tune out, particularly when many struggle with job loss, reduction in hours, children in the home, family dysfunction, etc. Think about how to concentrate your energy into a few key areas that will have the greatest impact, and focus there.

Resources & Essential Supplies: Offer local resources for food, hygiene items, cleaning supplies, diapers and formula, and other essential needs to participants. <https://findhelp.org> is a nationwide website with connections to these types of resources and more.

Health and Safety: Share local resources about COVID-19 testing, what to do if experiencing symptoms, or what to do if experiencing a medical or dental issue unrelated to the pandemic. Work with clients who have lost health insurance (or who did not have health insurance) to get coverage.

Contact Information: Update and maintain contact information for participants including phone numbers, e-mail, and street addresses. Useful during remote hearings (can call participants), when sharing important information, or for sending cards or incentives to participants.

Voxer: Group texting/walkie-talkie app to support participants and increase engagement. Great place to share thoughts, questions, photos, videos, useful information with participants and team. If the Judge is involved, be sure to include attorneys as well. Can recall messages and turn off location services. Note that phone numbers remain private and only names are shared.

E-mail: Create an e-mail address for your court that can be used to disseminate information to participants and to listen to participant feedback.

Google Voice: Consider creating a free Google Voice account whereby you can text or call participants without sharing your personal phone number.

Incentives: Consider making incentive packages or distributing electronic incentives. Write cards, give certificates, give inspirational materials. Incentives should match up with things that clients find value in, just like normal operations. Ideas include: grocery & retail gift cards such as Amazon, Wal-Mart, Target; seed packets for planting flowers or vegetables; work gloves; marshmallow roasting sticks; retail items that support outdoor activities such as compasses, carabiners, life straws, flashlights, sidewalk chalk or art supplies, games that can be played with family and children, yoga mats, multi-tools, crossword puzzles or word finds...

Mindfulness: Consider partnering with other agencies or organizations to provide free online mindfulness and meditation classes (similar to the UWS/Treatment Courts collaboration.)

Zoom Yoga & Men's Mindfulness: If your court has a yoga program, consider transitioning the program to online delivery. Consider modifying programming to increase client engagement/buy-in.

Online games: (Ringo, etc.) and other online get-togethers

Employment: Work with clients experiencing job loss or reductions in hours to get them connected to employment opportunities.

Suggestions for Overall Health/Well-being: Coronavirus anxiety workbook, journaling, cooking, exercise outside, home projects, short workouts, talk to a volunteer listener or become a volunteer listener, use Netflix Party to watch with friends online, free exercise online at the YMCA, online meetings

Online Schooling: Many free online education opportunities available (through Yale, etc.)

Virtual Volunteering & Remote Community Service Work: Offered on the honor system. Clients can earn credit toward required community service hours, or can volunteer to help out (feels better to do something for others!) Remote CSW is an invitation, not an obligation.

Don't Forget About Clients—they have ideas too: Look to participants for ideas on how to engage. Some of the best ideas come from participant engagement with one another and with the team.

Continuing Operations

Phase Advancements and Graduation: Continue to allow phase ups and graduations and consider conducting graduation ceremonies remotely. Important to positively reinforce engagement and achievement. Elicit feedback from participants on their preferences (receiving incentives, certificates, plaques, wristbands, medallions in the mail or delivered during field checks; online ceremonies vs. waiting to reschedule until in-person operations resume, etc.)

Probation: Continue field checks safely with appropriate social distancing and/or PPE. Connection and check-ins are crucial. Many participants are experiencing significant reductions in the level of in-person contact. Reaching out and providing the opportunity to talk is important. Phone calls work too! Do not meet with clients who are ill or who have contact with ill persons. Do not meet with clients if you yourself are ill.

Future Planning: The pandemic may not be all bad. There is opportunity for connection, introspection, remotely connecting with participants who are away on an overnight request or travel pass (can still attend court!) Useful also for courts who have rural populations, people spread over wide distances.

Remote Hearings: Work to make remote hearings as supportive and personal as possible. Happy Birthday. Zoom dance party in court. These things are funny, fun, and boost morale. Remote hearings can be sterile. Work to make it as personal as possible.

Offer clients tech support and training on how to successfully attend remote hearings. Tutorials can help. It takes time to learn new technologies so be supportive, responsive, flexible when scheduling hearings. Court hearings are public so family members, friends, etc. can come if they wish—use your discretion and share the hearing information with others to provide additional support for participants.

Remote hearings may actually be an opportunity to help clients feel more comfortable. People are accustomed to being in a courtroom setting. Now we are all in our homes or out in the community! Intimate environment. Be respectful and flexible of other considerations like family members or children in the home. Can suggest attending hearings in a vehicle or outside if privacy is a concern. We've had people fishing on a boat attend hearings before...

Data Tracking – consider making changes in the way you collect information about participants. Consider tracking when remote operations started, the impact this had on participants.

Collaboration: Continue to work closely with team members (case managers, recovery representatives, probation, peer support, etc.) to identify needs and barriers in the participant experience. Once identified, work collaboratively to meet those needs.

Within your own teams: Consider ways to maximize connection and support. Remember that you're doing all you can in a new environment with more restrictions than you're used to. You may not be able to control some of the outcomes of the pandemic (new charges, overdoses and even deaths, relapses.) This is no different than normal times! Encourage teams to be gentle with themselves and remember that they are doing the best they can.

Support a culture of innovation, and entertain new ideas/approaches from the team re: how to conduct operations.

Treatment Responses vs. Sanctions: Focus on treatment responses vs. sanctions. Our ability to sanction folks is limited, and jail, etc. are not the safest options available at the moment. Treatment responses focus on connection and support rather than "punishment."

Drug Testing: Needs to be conducted with participant and staff safety top of mind. Work with partner agencies to develop safe strategies for testing (UAs on a limited basis, sweat patches, OSM, interlock, etc.) Consider focusing efforts on only the highest risk clients. Many agencies are severely limiting testing or providing no testing at all. Consider treatment responses and safe field checks, phone calls, or virtual field checks as an alternative to remain connected.

New Technology: Consider acquiring technology with partner agencies to continue to provide services (ex. the tablet that was recently purchased for the jail to be able to continue diagnostic assessments.)

Staffing: Utilize available technology (phone, virtual video conferencing platforms, etc.) for staffing whenever possible. Ensuring participant confidentiality is paramount. Be sure that you are in a quiet, secure location so as not to inadvertently share private information. Can explore using initials, etc. if a private environment is not possible for some on the team (similar to having visitors in staffing.) Continue to share updates, etc. about participants using typical channels (e-mail, phone calls, etc.)

Program Intake: Taking on new participants when your team does not have access to the same resources, etc. as during typical operations can be a challenge. Consider developing virtual processes for program intake. Can also consider wait-listing new referrals until processes are in place for new admissions.

Program Exit: Participant needs differ from person to person. There is a need to recognize participants when they graduate from the program. Consider offering ceremonies virtually, or suspending graduation ceremonies until in-person operations resume (with social distancing and other precautions in place.) Termination hearings may need to be conducted remotely during this time.

Fees: Provide remote options for paying fees such as telephone or online. Since many are not working or are experiencing a reduction in hours, may need to relax or be flexible with fee obligations. Consider converting fees to community service work.

Explore group connections with other recovery groups during and after the pandemic to widen a person's scope of their recovery community and thriving recovery communities already formed.

RAD staff met internally and connected with statewide agencies to help guide our transition of service delivery to account for the new safety measures implemented through the pandemic. We immediately adapted our services to connect with individuals and agencies virtually through multiple platforms, or telephone. RAD staff will meet in person for crisis related situations, and provides transportation to emergency care, treatment or detox services. We distributed our service availability via email, website, social media, telephone, and through other agencies providing our referral information to individuals in the region. i.e. St. Louis County Website, TC Coordinators, etc. Governmental agencies, treatment providers and medical service providers communicated their adapted protocols and service practices in a similar way.

We identified the immediate need to develop and host a virtual telephone recovery support training. The virtual training provided an overview of peer based telephone recovery support and gave attendees the opportunity to practice having conversations through the use of role playing scenarios, etc. Training individuals to provide telephone recovery support expanded our capacity to leverage the shared experience of people in recovery to connect with individuals in need of support or resources during a time of isolation and significant change. Individuals in recovery or seeking recovery have expressed an increase in stress resulting from adjusting to a new daily routine, fear of change, financial uncertainty and increased isolation. We continue to hear from families with school age children about the frustration and added stress due to the transition to home schooling, the increase in need for food and a lack of access to remote school based lunch programs.

RAD experienced a significant increase in people reaching out for resources, and recovery related activities due to the pandemic and social distancing. We implemented a daily update and live feed on Facebook and a presence on Instagram. Our Facebook page includes daily inspirational live feeds, virtual resources including community connections to chat rooms, virtual social "mocktail" hours and virtual community picnics. This virtual recovery related social connection has proven beneficial for individuals to experience the fun and social connection of recovery.

RAD held a virtual personal needs drive in partnership with a local vender, Twin Ports Trailer Trash who picked up all new donations curbside, and supplied donors with a gift card to a local business affected by COVID-19. RAD staff has dedicated weekend time to distribute care packages to treatment court participants and households in need. RAD has continued to make connections across the state with community agencies to connect on a deeper level and develop the way to deliver services in the Peer community.

We connected with area treatment providers and agencies to update the operational status and the availability of virtual and/or in person services.

St. Louis County Public Health and Human Services developed and currently administers a website to maintain current information regarding the available services in our community during the pandemic.

RAD's telephone is answered 24/7. We provide peer based recovery support and check-ins via: telephone and various virtual platforms.

Social media: resources including zoom meeting schedules, a variety of Facebook group options, community updates, employment opportunities, MNsure applications, inspirational videos and messages of hope

Virtual recreation: virtual games, chat rooms and social meetings, virtual gatherings